



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Education Reform: What is a Chief to Do?

This week I had the opportunity to welcome participants to the International Symposium on Education Reform ([ISER](#)) that was hosted by Lars Bjork, Ph.D. and the University of Kentucky. It was great to see representatives from across the globe coming to Kentucky to discuss education reform. I offered a “chief’s” perspective on education reform. I divide the education reform issue into basically two camps – the reformers and the defenders.

Education reformers across the U.S. seem to have a few commonalities. The key tenet of the reformers is that public schools are failing as evidenced by national and international ranks in testing. The reformers claim that in order to “fix” public schools, we must have greater emphasis on assessment and accountability; choice options (charters and vouchers); improving teacher and principal evaluation systems; improving teacher preparation programs; addressing contract issues such as LIFO (last in, first out), tenure, pension and health care; data-driven decision making; and standardized teaching and learning.

The defenders blame poverty and changing demographics for the low performance of our public schools on national and international assessments. They say our top-performing schools are as good as any in the world, and most of these top-performing U.S. schools have very low poverty rates. In order to “fix” our public schools, they look to Finland for the answer. Finland focuses on elevating teaching as a profession and does not have annual standardized tests; teachers focus on assessment to improve instruction and learning; teacher preparation was reformed; teachers are seen as action researchers; and the social welfare system helps alleviate problems around poverty and demographics.

As a chief state school officer, my job is to balance the reformers and the defenders as we seek to help more students graduate college- and career-ready. The key strategies I use are to honor the terrific work that our educators have done in Kentucky for the last 20 years. Focus the conversation on the challenges of increased poverty and changing demographics, do not blame any group. Encourage collaboration and professional dialogue with all stakeholders about the education changes necessary to help more students succeed. Build relations with all stakeholder groups so there is some level of trust and mutual respect. And finally, communicating through as many channels as possible.

These are indeed difficult times in our nation as the need to improve education and improve the economy are inextricably linked; however, I know that Kentucky educators and key policy makers will continue to lead the way in making the right decisions about education reform as we ensure a brighter future for children.

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